New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 23 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 16, 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Cyrano de Bergerac"

Journal American

November 13, 1953

Ferrer Great In Fine Revival

By JOHN McCLAIN

JOSE FERRER, certainly one of our most estimable young men of the theatre, has returned to the City Center for a season of repertory, and last night he kicked off with "Cyrano de Bergerac." This will be followed at two-week intervals with "The Shrike," "Richard III" and "Charley's Aunt."

Here is good news for theatre addicts, for if last evening's effort is any criterion, the public will be treated to tasteful and opulent performances of these hardy perennials at the right price. If the same standard is maintained it seems to me the City Center has finally found itself, at least in the theatrical structure of the metropolis.

Mr. Ferrer is a familiar "Cyrano" to most of us, having performed it for both stage and screen in the past, and he is still the best in recent annals. In this production there is a slight but unimportant paucity of scenery, but this is generally overcome by a large and expert cast and a good job of lighting and costuming.

Play Holds Up

The Edmond Rostand play, written half a century ago, continues to hold up as one of the classics. Many of the hilarious lines, the poetic love passages, emerge with renewed freshness at each revival.

It is wish fulfillment for an actor of Ferrer's gifts and he makes the most of his many opportunities. Nobody, certainly, could give us a better fencing scene, a more poignant balcony sequence or a more anguished death.

I have always had certain reservations about the role of Roxane, and I regret to say Arlene Dahl, who played the part last night, failed to change my opinion. Miss Dahl is extraordinarily beautiful and I could hear everything she said, but she still comes out of it a somewhat limited heroine.

I guess I've just never been able to believe that she could have been so completely carried away by dear Christian, the Charley McCarthy who handles Cyrano's lines.

This is a personal fixation, no disparagment to Miss Dahl's talents, for I found the entire company exceptionally gifted. Ralph Clanton is a competent and experienced hand as de Guiche: Douglas Watson is a personable Christian and Jacques Aubuchon plays Ragueneau with skill and authority.

Richard Whorf has managed to utilize a minimum of heavy scenery to fill the enormous stage of the City Center and still achieve the effects required for the five acts.

But it is mostly a personal triumph for Mr. Ferrer, who is donating his services to the City Center fund for free. He deserves our support.

"CYRANO DE BERGERAC"

Revival of the Brian Hooker version of the Edmond Rostand play; staged by Jose Ferrer; settings by Richard Whorf; costumes by Emeline Roche; presented by the New York City Theatre Company at New York City Center Theatre, November 11, 1953. The cast:

Porter.....Benedict MacQuarie
A Cavalier.....Peter Brandon
A Musketeer.....Carl Albertson
A Lackey.....Richard Cowdery
Another Lackey.....Tom Tryon
A Guardsman..Charles Summers
Flower Girl....Carmen Alvarez
A Citizen..Wallace Widdecombe
His Son.....Sandy Campbell
A Cut Purse.....Peter Buchan
Orange Girl.....Lori March
A Marquis.....Jack Fletcher
Brissaille.....Albert Whitley
Ligniere.....Gordon Nelson
Christian De Neuvillette.....
Douglas Watson
Ragueneau....Jacques Aubuchon
Le Bret.....Philip Huston
Roxane, nee Madeleine Robin..
Arlene Dahl
Her Duenna.....Paula Laurence
Comte De Guiche..Ralph Clanton
Vicomte De Valvert..Dean Cetrulo
Montfleury.....Leopold Badia
Cyrano De Bergerac.....
Jose Ferrer
Bellerose.....Stanley Carlson
Jodelet.....Robinson Stone
A Meddler.....Bill Butler
A Soubrette.....Tamar Cooper
A Comedienne.....Jill Kraft
Lise.....Betty Bartley
Carbon De Castel-Jaloux.....
G. Wood
A Poet.....Vincent Donahue
Another Poet.....John Glennon
Sister Marthe...Jarmila Daubek
Mother Marguerite..Viola Roache
Sister Claire.....Linda Berlin
A Nun.....Ann Chisholm
Another Nun...Marijane Maricle

DAILY NEWS

November 13, 1953

City Center Play Series Starts With Ferrer's Romantic 'Cyrano'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In celebration of its tenth anniversary as a popular establishment for theatre, opera, music and ballet, the New York City Center of Drama and Music has begun a play season with Jose Ferrer's production of "Cyrano de Bergerac." At fortnightly intervals, there will be offerings of "The Shrike," "Richard III" and "Charley's Aunt," which will carry our playhouse nicely through the evening of Sunday, Jan. 3.

Ferrer is the Cyrano of the current play and he will be the star of all the other productions. This undertaking is even more generous than it is ambitious—and, heavens to Betsy, it is ambitious enough; very few actors today would have the will, the will-power and the physical strength to take on such a program, although it wouldn't have been so much in the old days of stock. Ferrer and a large company of attractive players are engaged in this four-play project for no personal profit whatever as their contribution toward keeping the City Center alive as a popular playhouse.

The Last Romance.

"Cyrano de Bergerac," in Brian Hooker's beautiful version of Edmond Rostand's poetic drama, is the only good romantic theatre we have left in an age of realism which began in the 1890's. It is extravagantly sentimental, baldly melodramatic and unashamed of its poesy. It is something everybody should see several times in his life.

It is something to see at the City Center, with Ferrer as the long-nosed Gascon, with an admirable setting designed by Richard Whorf and with Arlene Dahl as the most beautiful Roxane in anybody's memory. Miss Dahl does not have the shy and virginal quality that Frances Reid has bestowed upon Roxane in previous productions, but she does speak clearly and with intelligence. I should like to see this movie actress in more stage plays.

A Willing Company.

Ferrer's Cyrano is the best one of our time—a crafty, zestful and graceful performance of about as romantic and touching a role as any actor could hope for. And with Joe at the City Center are such stalwarts as Ralph Clanton as de Guiche, Paula Laurence as the Duenna, Douglas Watson as the inarticulate Christian, Jacques Aubuchon as Ragueneau, the poetic pastry-cook, and Philip Huston as Le Bret.

It isn't only the veterans who are giving their time, talents and enthusiasm to the City Center. In the large company of "Cyrano de Bergerac" are many young men and women who are coming up in the theatre. I note that the nuns and sisters of the last scene include Linda Berlin, who must be Irving's daughter, and Jarmila Daubek, whose mother is Jarmila Novotna.

A salute to them all—from Joe Ferrer to the most obscure member of the big company.

Daily Mirror

November 13, 1953

'Cyrano de Bergerac' Is Magnificent

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There are two ways of approaching a play: objectively and subjectively. Some years ago, we attended a party of theatre-wise folk, after a performance of Paul Green's "The Lost Colony," at Manteo, N. C. We were awaiting a hurricane. Tension was high. To relieve it a little, we suggested a symposium.

PROF. GREEN agreed to act as moderator. We were to vote for two plays: 1) a masterpiece, by the yardstick of objective criticism; and 2) the play that had given us the most pleasure, through a purely and subjective reaction. As we recall it, "Hamlet," "King Lear" and "Oedipus Rex" split the ballots in the first category, while "Cyrano de Bergerac" was an uncontested favorite in the second.

Well, the New York City Theatre Company opened an eight-weeks season at the City Center last evening with an admirable production of Rostand's "Cyrano." Since we have already tipped our mitt, we can only add that, in our opinion, this is the greatest piece of sheer theatre ever penned. It is a play for actors and audiences.

Too often, foreign plays fall victims to bad translations. But Rostand's classic has been given a superlative adaptation by Brian Hooker. This is the definitive English version, and Jose Ferrer is wisely using it at the City Center. Ferrer is an actor, an impresario, of taste and imagination.

HE HAS STAGED "Cyrano" beautifully. He has cast it well. He etches the title role with grace and style. He is, by all odds, the best of the Gascons today. We only regret that he hasn't Walter Hampden's resonant delivery, but this is quibbling. And, after all, the huge City Center is calculated to dwarf the human voice, particularly when it is used in an intimate manner.

Arlene Dahl, of the films, is a lovely Roxane. She is certainly not the perfect Roxane, but we salute her for having brought off a difficult role most creditably. We honor her for putting her movie reputation on the line, and are happy to report that she hasn't dimmed it. Other Hollywood stars owe more to Broadway than Arlene, but she is one of the few who has paid her debt to the theatre by coming back to us.

Douglas Watson, one of our better young actors, is an excellent Christian. Jacques Aubuchon is a good Ragueneau. Paula Laurence makes the most of the Duenna. Ralph Clanton is a first-rate De Guiche. And Philip Huston, one of our more gifted classicists, does exceptionally well by Le Bret.

THE VERSATILE Richard Whorf, still co-starring in "The Fifth Season," has designed breath-taking sets, and Emeline Roche, appropriate costumes. Whorf and Miss Roche, we think, have worked wonders, on a limited budget.

But, back to "Cyrano." Why do so many love it? Perhaps because everyone admires courage, dignity, wit and heart. Cyrano, of the long nose, the homely features and the great soul, is what every man wants to be, and what his best girl wants him to be. The ladies might prefer a more handsome lover, but it's not the externals that count in the long run.

"Cyrano de Bergerac" is probably the most popular play of all time, of our time, that is. So it is needless to point out the merits of its ringing poetry, its soaring scenes, its eternal romance and its nobility. For us, any man could die by the philosophy of its final scene. For here, the doomed Cyrano, blasts prejudice, vice and with humility exalts virtue. It's magnificent!

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 13, 1953

Ferrer's Magic Lights Cyrano

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

A great many of those who saw Jose Ferrer's "Cyrano de Bergerac" when it first ran on Broadway, probably will see it again in its reincarnation at the City Center.

I hope anybody who missed the earlier performance will be sure to see it now, because it is a kind of theater, glamorous and gallant, that we almost never see any more. It is romantic theater, that soars on imagination and sings in poetry, without self-consciousness and certainly without shame.

Quite Different.

It is so different from modern theater, probing into motives, dissecting everything. What people do in "Cyrano" is too grand to need explanation.

If you do not know the story, accept the fact that it is as thrilling and neat as any ever used for the drama. It is a love story. Cyrano of the hideous face and the poet's soul adds the beauty of his words to the beauty of young Christian, and so wins the lovely Roxane for the boy.

There is the wonderful moment on the battlefield when she is saved from the truth, by Christian's death. And Cyrano typically assures the dying youth that Roxane loves him.

Roxane Hears Truth.

Then there is the unforgettably moving moment at the end, when years afterwards, Roxane learns the truth as Cyrano dies.

It is a play you can laugh with, thoroughly weep at, but more important, it is a play that will make you do all this in spite of any resistance.

Mr. Ferrer has played the role many times, and with a flourish and understanding nobody else in the theater could likely equal. He is undertaking a monumental job in presenting four plays at the Center and starring in all of them. "Cyrano" is a fine beginning.

Sharp Wit.

The duelling poet does not always seem as exultant as he sometimes did in the past, but I think his sad moments are more touching than ever, and his humorous ones more witty.

The play picks up some new dimensions from Douglas Watson's performance as Christian, who is too often played as a dullard. Mr. Watson permits him sensitivity, which makes his inarticulateness all the more touching. And he plays his shyness for bursts of comedy, most particularly in the balcony scene where Cyrano is feeding him love lines to woo Roxane.

Arlene Dahl makes a most picturesque heroine, startling with her red hair and creamy skin. She gives the girl spirit, which she should have, and if there is no great variety in the performance, she achieves a true and moving quality for the difficult last scene.

Ralph Clanton is the elegant and villainous de Guiche, Paula Laurence an exquisite and chipper Duenna and Jacques Aubuchon a robust baker.

Richard Whorf has set the play in beautiful romantic backgrounds, with great flourish and color for the battle, and warm fading brilliance in the convent trees.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
November 13, 1953

THEATER

'Cyrano de Bergerac'

By WALTER F. KERR

THAT'S a pretty picture-book production Richard Whorf has designed for City Center's "Cyrano de Bergerac." A moonlit Paris glistens snowily in the background. The mullioned windows of Ragueneau's bakery shop glow with warmth as the poets gather. There's a nice romantic trellis for Christian to climb and a ranging series of steps for Cyrano to flash his sword across.

Against this gay confectioner's window the company which Jose Ferrer has assembled swirl their capes, toss their plumes, and sing out challenges with resolute derring-do. Arlene Dahl is a color-plate illustration if I ever saw one: a titian-haired Roxane with a regal chin, a dashing stride, and a good bit of fire in her eyes. Douglas Watson is a Christian who looks like a hero, baring his teeth in a mocking grin and daring to twit the redoubtable Cyrano with handsome audacity.

• • •

Mr. Ferrer himself is having meticulous fun with the sly asides, the meaningful hesitations, the discreetly conspiratorial gestures of his lovelorn grotesque with the very long nose. His pantomime is almost always evocative. He turns on an upstart who is deliberately baiting him, starts for him furiously, and then hesitates—with just the right shade of mute astonishment—when he discovers he cannot touch him. Reciting a love lyric to his adored Roxane, and quite forgetting that the Christian for whom he is doing it is standing near by, Mr. Ferrer really forgets—and is brought back to earth with a shattering start. The detail has an intensity of its own.

• • •

If there is something a little sleepy about the production as a whole, it may come in part from uncontrollable factors. Rehearsals at City Center are bound to be piecemeal, and Mr. Ferrer has rather obviously been forced into a sort of "you-go-Left-while-I-go-Right" operatic staging. A crowd will disperse rather hastily in time for a spotlight to pick out the star; when he has run through a predetermined slice of the Rostand imagery, the team will be at him again, slapping him on the shoulders and welcoming him back to the bench. There's a certain clockwork balance to everything that goes on, and it does have a lulling effect.

• • •

The size of the auditorium, too, is probably playing tricks with the Ferrer voice. The actor has a number of lyric incantations to chant his way through, and the effort to fill an expansive proscenium forces line after line into the upper nasal reaches. As a result, Mr. Ferrer seems to be pursuing his nose about the stage, and occasionally to be talking through it. The poetry—I suppose the Brian Hooker translation can be called poetry—is seriously blanketed in the process, and this particular "Cyrano" is at its best when it is being most casual.

• • •

In the supporting company, Paula Laurence is a crisply demure and doll-like Duenna; Jacques Aubuchon keeps his versifying pastry-cook safely this side of Billy Gilbert vaudeville; Ralph Clanton is a suavely menacing De Guiche, and Gordon Nelson is a well-spoken Ligniere. The Paul Bowles music provides a graceful and much-needed lyric lift, though at one point Mr. Ferrer is unaccountably drowned in it.

Since City Center is really operating on a stock-company basis, it is probably unreasonable to complain of a stock-company performance. That's what this is, then: a workhorse job which is by no means definitive, but which outlines the familiar story clearly and which at least suggests, now and then, its full rococo flavor.

New York Post
November 13, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Jose Ferrer Returns as Cyrano

Each generation in our theater seems to find its own Cyrano, in a kind of apostolic succession. The previous one had Walter Hampden; we have Jose Ferrer, and there is no reason for choosing between them. All it is necessary to say is that Mr. Ferrer, who is currently just about the most accomplished of American actors, is at least as fine in the great romantic role today as he was when he first played it a few years ago. Possibly he is even a bit better. It is my impression that he manages the humor of the part with additional ease and dexterity.

The present revival, which opened at the City Center on Wednesday night and was inspected by the newspaper reviewers last evening, is in every way a satisfactory presentation of one of the most famous and enduring of modern dramas. Naturally, Mr. Ferrer's swashbuckling, humorous, romantic, eloquent and touching portrayal of the all-important central figure dominates the production, but Douglas Watson's tongue-tied Christian, Ralph Clanton's arrogant De Guiche, and Jacques Aubuchon's pastry cook-poet are sound performances that help considerably.

No Modern Clothes

As for Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac," in Brian Hooker's accepted English adaptation, it remains, after all of these years, the classic of romantic costume melodrama. Heaven knows, it is a play of the past that we are never going to see done in modern clothes, because a contemporary Cyrano would have gone to see a plastic surgeon about his celebrated nose, and that would be the end of M. Rostand's tragedy. But, as a dashing sentimental charade in a colorful setting, it continues to possess charm, imagination and emotional effectiveness.

Of course, with just a slight change in mood, the famous romantic drama might easily be made into a sardonic attack on the entire idea of romantic self-sacrifice. It was no doubt a splendidly heroic gesture for the eloquent but ugly Cyrano to accept his love for Roxane as hopeless and act as ghost writer and adviser for his successful rival, the dumb but beautiful soldier, Christian de Neuvillette. But the only result of his foolish gallantry was that Roxane married the wrong man, Christian died knowing he wasn't really loved, and Cyrano remained a bachelor.

Cyrano the Critic

But I suppose there is little point in noting that Cyrano's mistaken nobility, instead of making two other people happy, made all three of them miserable. I am even being ungrateful to Rostand, who complimented my profession by making his hero, among other things, the only romantic drama critic in history. And a very successful one, in his ability to drive bad actors from the stage. The important matter is that "Cyrano de Bergerac" captures an agreeable theatrical mood of dashing gallantry and gives it lyric and dramatic stature.

The romantic heroine, Roxane, who is a sort of straight woman for Cyrano's eloquent imagination and Christian's well-meaning stupidity, is played by Arlene Dahl, who is a Hollywood notable. Miss Dahl, as everyone knows, is a very handsome girl, and that is the chief requirement for her role. I doubt if she could be described as exactly an empress of the emotions, but that isn't necessary, and I am sure she is of help to the play. Mr. Ferrer gets the City Center season off to a good start by his splendid playing of a classic role.

The New York Times
November 13, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although seven years have gone by since José Ferrer first appeared in "Cyrano de Bergerac," it seems like yesterday at the City Center where he is playing the part again. The romantic Rostand swashbuckler is one of the grand theatre pieces, and Brian Hooker's version carries the gasconnading flavor of Rostand over into the English language.

Produced in five huge sets and with fifty-five acting parts, this is a stupendous project to fit into the City Center series. But Mr. Ferrer's revival retains the amplitude of the original with all the furious crowd scenes and masquerades that put icing on the cake. Arlene Dahl, a beautiful young woman who is also an intelligent actress, has absented herself from Hollywood long enough to play Roxane.

* * *

Written with deliberate literary extravagance, "Cyrano" makes the modern theatre look pallid. Modern subjects cannot be handled with so much panache. And Mr. Ferrer is just the man to pour out the bombast, to carve rich phrases with big gestures, to fence romantically, to play at woolng and to let go with a bang. For he is a theatre man extraordinary, and this is his most exuberant show. Cyrano, the greatest extrovert in romantic drama, suits him down to the ground.

Everyone in the cast acquires excitement from Mr. Ferrer's flamboyant leadership. As the tongue-tied suitor for Roxane's favors, Douglas Watson is romantic and amusing. This "Cyrano de Bergerac" is more notable for its humor than for its ardor; perhaps the literary style is too ornate for passion. But Mr. Watson lets none of the humor escape from his ludicrous balcony scene. Jacques Aubuchon's poetic poetry-cook, a wonderful bit of clowning, is vastly entertaining.

Take note also of Ralph Clanton's icily imperious Comte de Guiche, who represents the loyal opposition; and Paula Laurence's striking, imperceptibly ironic duenna. Abetted by innumerable courtiers, patrons, soldiers, lackeys, nabobs, cooks and poets, they keep the stage swarming with theatricality. For Rostand, impatient with false economies, composed in the grand manner.

* * *

The spacious scenery, with its story-book flavor and its glimpses of Paris and the stars, is the work of Richard Whorf, who is acting now in a less florid play, "The Fifth Season," at the Cort. Any dreams of glory he may have while he portrays the cloak-and-suit business are fully exploited in his ornamental sets for "Cyrano."

It is a resounding drama. Miss Dahl swimming lightly across the stage as Roxane or shining gloriously in the balcony, Mr. Ferrer bandying poetic wit with his inferiors as Cyrano or disdainfully killing a fop in a bravura duel—these are pleasures enough for one night in the theatre. They are, in fact, all theatre. Not a word of truth is spoken all evening.

"Sabrina Fair"

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

November 12, 1953

'Sabrina Fair' Rich in Comedy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Sabrina Fair" at the National turns out to be a thoroughly entertaining evening. The biggest compliment you can pay it is to compare it to a Philip Barry comedy brought up to date.

Considered with any degree of solemnity, the problems here are pretty mellow. But plenty of bright talk and lots of bright performing give the play an air of satire most engaging.

In the Twenties it became a hot fictional issue whether the offspring of domestic servants and the children of their employers could make a go of marriage. Nobody cares very much these days, perhaps because the thought of domestic servants in any case seems pleasantly archaic.

Social Schism.

In "Sabrina Fair" Samuel Taylor uses the social schism to dramatize the spiritual difference between a man and a girl. The former enlarges his old family fortune by his business acumen, in an effort to run the world around him by power. The chauffeur's daughter escapes from her shyness by lashing out as a secretary to a multi-initialed government branch in Paris.

Then she comes home.

The materials may seem familiar, but like the rich setting here, they are really completing a cycle. It has been a long time since it was fashionable for anybody in a play to be terribly rich, yet have a serious thought, and the ability to turn a phrase.

The plot is ingeniously spread out, so it looks thicker than it is. Margaret Sullavan has grown bright and sophisticated in Paris. She has an offer of marriage from a young French Midas. She has come home to see whether she is still in love with one of the sons of her father's wealthy boss.

Delayed Suspense.

This childhood crush holds little audience suspense, when you note that Joseph Cotten is costarred, and that he is immediately very rude to her.

He tries to throw her at Scott McKay, his more relaxed brother. Their mother decides not to invite her to a party. Then the Frenchman turns up, and in this role Robert Duke, like a junior Boyer, might well win her in spite of his money.

When the true character of the chauffeur, Russell Collins, is whimsically revealed, the whole issue goes off its financial basis onto one of personality. The plot then only needs a shove, to end.

This comes from Luella Gear, as a family friend, who cannot bear listening out her window to Cotten bedeviling Miss Sullavan any longer, and tells him so. It is the crowning incident of a beautifully Geared comic role.

Miss Sullavan is back on her track again, after stubbing her toe last year. She still asks how you are as if pledging allegiance to her flag, and breaks your heart. She is young and pretty and wistful and gay, which is more than enough for any actress to be.

Background Growling.

Cotten looks magnetically cynical, and growls around in the background, as the story demands, and McKay is boyish, leering and agreeable. Cathleen Nesbitt is a sleek and witty mother of the boys, while John Cromwell as their father, quips neck and neck with Miss Gear as the show's top contributor of hilarity.

"Sabrina Fair" has been directed by H. C. Potter, with delightful emphasis on the comic, and tender brief consideration for its wistful cares. Donald Oenslager's setting is tastefuly luxurious enough to make the indoor and outdoor tennis courts and swimming pools all believable.

"SABRINA FAIR"

Comedy by Samuel Taylor; staged by H. C. Potter; setting and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes supervised by Bianca Stroock; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the National Theatre, November 11, 1953. The cast:

Maude Larrabee.....
Cathleen Nesbitt
Julia Ward McKinlock.....
Luella Gear
Linus Larrabee, Jr.....
Joseph Cotten
Linus Larrabee..John Cromwell
Margaret.....Katharine Raht
David Larrabee....Scott McKay
Gretchen.....Ruth Woods
Sabrina Fairchild.....
Margaret Sullavan
Fairchild.....Russell Collins
A Young Woman..Harriette Selby
A Young Man.....Gordon Mills
Another Young Woman.....
Loraine Grover
Another Young Man.....
Michael Steele
Paul D'Argenson...Robert Duke

New York Post

November 12, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Actors Come First Once More

Once more a lot of fine actors, a handsome production and a general expertness of staging are lavished on an undistinguished play. It seems to be a characteristic of the season. But matters are somewhat better this time. Samuel Taylor's new comedy, "Sabrina Fair," which opened last night at the National Theater, at least has a number of brightly humorous lines, some enlivening minor characters, and considerable incidental sprightliness, with the result that its probable success at the box office has quite a bit of justification.

In what he terms "a romantic comedy," Mr. Taylor is telling of a wealthy and presumably aristocratic family living on the north shore of Long Island, and of the measure of confusion wrought when the chauffeur's daughter returns from her job with an American governmental agency in Paris, looking handsome and being Margaret Sullavan, and two of the sons fall in love with her. There aren't many surprises, the least being the identity of the young man who gets the heroine, but there are those humorous lines and a number of philosophical observations.

Musing on Life

It is, I think, in these musings on such topics as life, love, power, marriage, independence, riches and what one wants to get out of existence that "Sabrina Fair" is in its least happy phase. The talk on these matters is literate enough, but I doubt if it is very striking or provocative. Permit me to say it is far from Shavian in its sparkle and let it go at that. It is when Mr. Taylor drops his preoccupation with ideas, and allows his minor characters to take over that the play becomes interesting. Particularly when John Cromwell and Luella Gear come on.

Mr. Cromwell, who is one of the ablest and most entertaining of American actors, plays the father of the family, a slightly stuffy and abstracted old gentleman, with a passion for attending funerals and a fine share of wit. It is an amusing role, and he makes every moment of it count. The play never fails to come to delightful life when Mr. Cromwell is on the stage, which is too seldom. And Miss Gear, who is an outstanding expert on quietly getting the most out of a sardonic comedy line, has wisely been allotted a pleasant number of them.

This is certainly not to deny the importance of the contributions made by the other players. I have a suspicion that Margaret Sullavan has grown a trifle mannered as an actress and she may be slightly mature for her role, but she is a highly accomplished and effective performer, and she portrays the chauffeur's daughter with all of her celebrated guile and charm. As the son who loves power and wins the girl, Joseph Cotten, returned from a long absence in Hollywood, has the proper amount of ruthlessness and romantic appeal for the part.

Then, there is Russell Collins, who brings distinction to every role he plays, as the chauffeur, who is also a bookworm and a financier on the side. As usual, he is of enormous help. And there are valuable portrayals by Cathleen Nesbitt as the boys' mother and by Scott McKay as the son who doesn't get the girl. Much aid is likewise provided by the staging of H. C. Potter and the setting of Donald Oenslager. All of them manage to give liveliness and what must be called glamor to a brittle comedy, which is more than can always be said.

New York Herald Tribune

November 12, 1953

THEATER

'Sabrina Fair'

By WALTER F. KERR

Once Upon a Time

"SABRINA FAIR" is a play that ought to have been written by the late Philip Barry twenty years ago, and frequently was. On a canopied terrace, tossing off highballs, sit a number of amiably lacquered sophisticates. Into their midst comes a shy little chauffeur's daughter, ablaze with life but decidedly lacking in social qualifications. The question raised by the rest of the evening at the National is whom she shall marry, and for how much.

Mr. Barry used to make the idle rich seem, blandly, confidently captivating. Samuel Taylor makes them seem merely idle.

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Not that the author of this new "romantic comedy" hasn't a few bright quips to scatter about the garden of his glittering North Shore estate. He has fashioned a half-dozen caustic snarls for that mistress of insult, Luella Gear. As a magazine editor with a spectacular Parisian background, Miss Gear lowers her glasses, lowers her voice, and lowers the boom on a line like "The bride wore a satin gown edged with old common and preferred stock." It gets a resounding laugh.

Considerably better is the droll, unruffled nonsense which has been written for John Cromwell. Mr. Cromwell is the stuffy but tartly opinionated master of this Long Island paradise, a man who has come to that "sad time of old age when all pretty girls look alike." As he briskly denounces his sons for thinking of marrying beneath themselves, tries vainly to follow his family's bewildering conversation, and gives the whole thing up to pursue his passion for unpretentious funerals, Mr. Cromwell is money in anybody's bank.

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But when it comes to supplying the stars of the evening—Margaret Sullavan and Joseph Cotten—with the sort of moonstruck magic which will make the whole thing tolerable, Mr. Taylor falters badly.

Miss Sullavan is, of course, that scholarly little mouse who once lived over the Larrabee's garage, staring down at the indoor and outdoor tennis courts, the indoor and outdoor swimming pools. Back now from Paris after a stint for the government, she is suddenly beautiful and suddenly breathless with zest for the world. ("She wants to love it to death," someone says). Miss Sullavan, radiant as radiant dare be, takes a tomboy stance, puts her fists on her hips, and challenges the assembled idlers with racing, husky exuberance. Her mysteriously expressive monotone is put to fetching use; her hands go to her face in amused dismay; her smile—the one in which she bites her lip at the same time—is as warm as ever it was.

But the mouse isn't really a mouse, the sprite isn't really a sprite. The author has been vague and wandering in defining his nymph, and when she announces that her head is full of wonderful things she wants to do but that she isn't quite sure what any of them are, you feel that she has come awfully close to an ugly truth.

* * *

Joseph Cotten is the older Larrabee boy, a chap who's made his millions at thirty-five and has nothing much to do these days but lounge around in a yachting cap. The actor lounges agreeably, smiles infectiously, and seems quite understandably abstracted.

The company is gilt-edged throughout. Cathleen Nesbitt is sleek and lovely as a mother who can always see the children's 'side of things' so long as it coincides with her own. Scott McKay is ruefully amiable as a Larrabee who will marry the girl if he can and won't be particularly upset if he can't. Russell Collins has a dandy scene, late in the evening, in which he explains the rather complicated financial intuitions which have turned a chauffeur into a millionaire. And Robert Duke is a suitably polished continental collar-ad.

Every once in a while "Sabrina Fair" pauses reflectively and tries to say, in effect, that "people don't believe in this sort of thing any more." I'm not sure it's quite cricket for Mr. Taylor to be passing the buck to "people." He just hasn't made us believe it.

Daily Mirror

November 12, 1953

Sullavan at Her Best In Smart 'Sabrina Fair'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Sabrina Fair," which the Playwrights' Company brought to the National Theatre Wednesday evening, is notable on two counts: It restores Margaret Sullavan to the stage, and establishes Samuel Taylor as a craftsman in high comedy to be reckoned with. The comedy of manners has become something of a lost art since the passing of Philip Barry, so it's good to have Taylor trying his skilled hand at it.

Such plays, in the hands of a Barry or a Lonsdale, are usually on the thin side when it comes to plot. At first sampling, they appear to be nothing more than a lot of polished people delivering polished lines with polish. But when you analyze them, they harbor a lot of ideas, sound and provocative ideas. Thus it is with "Sabrina Fair."

THE NEW ARRIVAL has to do, essentially, with a girl who wants to conquer the world with love and a young financier who wants to do the same via power. He is the one member of his aristocratic family who has the knack of making sufficient money to maintain a costly Long Island estate and a fleet of yachts. She is the daughter of the family chauffeur, pretty, vibrant and in love with life.

There are other suitors, of course: a younger brother of the tycoon, who wants comfort rather than adventure; and a wealthy French sportsman. When it looks as though the girl may wed the ineffectual brother, it is her father who opposes the match. It turns out, in the best Lonsdale manner, that he has amassed a fortune through wise investments and has done more sound reading than any of them.

Miss Sullavan, one of our brightest stars, has one of her best roles in years, and is dazzling in it. It is difficult to understand why it took the preoccupied financier most of two acts to succumb to her charm. Joseph Cotton is quite likable and believable as the shrewd young manipulator of money and power.

John Cromwell, as usual, is excellent as the well-meaning, conservative head of the family, who spends most of his time gossiping at fancy funerals. Cathleen Nesbitt is fine as his wife, bent on maintaining the proprieties of a vanishing way of life. Given the most sardonic lines, Luella Gear, as editor of a fashionable women's magazine, makes them crackle superbly.

The ever dependable Russell Collins is first-rate as the chauffeur who knows how to turn a dollar between studying the classics. Scott McKay has an easy and ingratiating style as the aimless brother. And there's a nice performance by Robert Duke as the Frenchman.

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H. C. POTTER HAS directed with a sure touch, and Donald Oenslager has designed a gorgeous setting. Bianca Stroock has contributed costumes that should please the women.

"Sabrina Fair," in our book, is a delightful, sparkling hit. It represents a blending of outstanding theatrical talents. It offers hilarity and a nostalgic picture of magnificence that is rapidly disappearing. For most playgoers, it should provide an escape into a world of romance, splendor and sophistication.

After sitting through so many drab plays about drab people, it's fun to encounter suave and witty companions for an evening. We trust that Taylor will continue to explore the amusing and rewarding vein of high comedy which he has opened with "Sabrina Fair." We enjoyed ourselves at the National, and think you will, too.

DAILY NEWS

November 12, 1953

'Sabrina Fair' a Cheerful Comedy For Miss Sullavan and Joe Cotten

By JOHN CHAPMAN

As I recall "Harvey," Elwood P. Dowd related some advice his mother gave him: "'You can be oh, so clever or oh, oh so pleasant.' I recommend pleasant. You may quote me." It's a fine clean maxim in a dirty world, for pleasantness is something of which we never get enough,—particularly in the modern theatre. "Sabina Fair," which the Playwrights' Company presented last evening at the National Theatre, contributes a great deal to the general good feeling of the drama season, and I recommend it.

This word "pleasant," however, has been weakened by such powerful critical adjectives as "terrific" and "wonderful," and has been known to drive audiences away from theatres. So let me hasten to add that Samuel Taylor's comedy, "Sabrina Fair," frequently is very clever and it is being most engagingly acted by Margaret Sullavan, Joseph Cotten, John Cromwell, Cathleen Nesbitt and all the others of an excellent cast under the resilient direction of H. C. Potter.

The Chauffeur's Daughter.

Sabrina (pronounced Sabreena) Fairchild is another modern Cinderella. She is the daughter of the chauffeur for a fabulously wealthy family whose manse is on the north shore of Long Island. Here there are two Prince Charmings, brothers, and Sabrina manages to get the right one.

Author Taylor has thus provided all the surface glitter for a fashionable comedy; fortunately he has provided quite a bit of sparkle, too —many bright, quick lines and a twist or two of the plot, as when the chauffeur reveals modestly that he has become a millionaire through the conservative investment of his savings.

Miss Sullavan, who used to be a little tomboy on the estate, returns from France, where she has worked as a secretary in a U. S. Government bureau, quite a changed girl. If you can imagine Miss Sullavan ever having been a tomboy and then take a good look at her now, you will realize how great the change has been and will understand how she sets two Prince Charmings aquiver.

One of the young men, Scott McKay, is an affable fellow, but not for our Margaret. The other, Mr. Cotten, isn't nice at all; he is a hard-headed, cold business genius who has built up his father's measly two millions into a respectable amount, and he is the one our Margaret wants and gets.

Cromwell Excels.

I wouldn't say that Taylor, as a writer of high comedy, has yet acquired the polish of an S. N. Behrman, and he does allow his heroine to talk too long during the first act; but his sense of humor is sound and sharp. "Sabrina Fair" is frankly an artifice, and taken as such it is enjoyable.

Co-stars Cotten and Sullavan are, as one has a right to expect, most charming. The most vigorous and delightful acting is turned in by John Cromwell as the blustery and highly proper father of Cinderella's two suitors. Probably the funniest instant of the comedy is Cromwell's reaction to the news that his chauffeur (nicely played by Russell Collins) has been making money on the side. "Fairchild," he explodes, "you're fired!" I'm an old John Cromwell fan, and this is one of his best pieces of work.

There are other pleasant people in the Playwrights' company — Luella Gear as a salty relative, Miss Nesbitt as a cold and proper matron and Robert Duke as an unctuous young Frenchman among them. Donald Oenslager has designed a handsome millionaires' terrace overlooking Long Island Sound. It's all fiction, of course, but it's fun.